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Please Come Home

Don't Laugh

Novelists and movie script-writers, especially those who deal in satire, are going to walk carefully after the New York State Supreme Court's ruling on "John Goldfarb, Please Come Home." The immediate lesson seems to be that you can make fun by name of the President of the United States, and the Congress, and the State Department, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Armed Services, and the Ivy League college, and the Virginia Military Institute, and the Church of England, and the Stock Exchange, and any other institution, business and profession, but don't make fun of the University of Notre Dame.

The ultimate effect may be more dangerous: if Notre Dame can stop its name being used in this farcical fashion, other institutions may get the idea that they can do the same. It would be good-by to satire except in the most generalized sense, and thus good-by to an important element in our tradition of free speech.

Notre Dame was, of course, protecting its reputation by bringing suit against the movie makers: the university is trying to de-emphasize its association with football and upgrade its scholastic standing, and it may have felt that these efforts would be damaged by the film. The fact remains that for people who don't know much about football, and who have been indoctrinated by movies about Knut Rockne, Notre Dame is still the first name that comes to mind when college football is mentioned. On these grounds the movie makers must have chosen it.

As things now stand, those who have seen the movie or read the book may be inclined to feel that instead of creating a piece of nonsense the authors hit too close to home. And a lot of other institutions which don't like being teased will be tempted to bring suit too. The satirists will be understandably leery of picking sensitive targets—which are often the most important targets to shoot at—and the commonweal will suffer. "John Goldfarb" may be a trivial movie but its consequences could be far from trivial.